DAWN

OPINION

Anti-terrorism fight

PAKISTAN'S troubled relationship with Afghanistan now forms the centre of its security crisis. The International Crisis Group notes the irony that Pakistan has been the country most affected by the Taliban's return to power. What once looked like a manageable neighbour has become the source of growing instability along our western border. The problem is not a lack of engagement. Pakistan invested early in contact with the Taliban, hoping that dialogue and familiarity would translate into restraint. That expectation has not been met. The Afghan Taliban have failed to curb the banned TTP operating on their soil, whose attacks have martyred hundreds of Pakistani soldiers and police in recent years. This has become a sustained security threat for Pakistan — one which the Taliban are not willing to help eliminate.

On account of the Taliban's myopic approach, Islamabad has had no option but to lean increasingly on force, knowing that air strikes, border closures and deportations also carry risks. Unfortunately, it is lost on the Taliban that escalation only reduces room for diplomacy and that repeated confrontations raise the danger of miscalculation, civilian harm and regional fallout. While the Taliban fail to see reason at their end, different quarters within Pakistan have pointed out that better governance and policing in this country as well as an end to political divisiveness can support military action. The Pakistani state, therefore, must work towards a clearly defined political and security strategy that factors in input from all stakeholders in the country. Expectations from Kabul must also be grounded in reality. The Taliban's reluctance to act against the TTP and other groups they have permitted to operate from their territory is driven not just by defiance but also by fear of internal backlash and fragmentation. Putting pressure on them alone may not result in compliance. Pakistan must pair pressure with incentives, using trade access, transit facilities and humanitarian coordination as bargaining tools rather than blunt instruments.

Engagement with Afghanistan should continue, but it must be firm, structured and coordinated with regional partners such as China, the Gulf states and Central Asian neighbours who retain channels into Kabul. Border controls should improve through technology, intelligence-sharing and regulated crossings, not ad hoc closures that damage livelihoods. Most importantly, internal reforms — better policing, effective prosecutions, local political inclusion and economic investment in conflict-hit districts — must be treated as core to national security. The choice is not between talking and striking, but between a clear strategy and a costly stalemate that drains lives, resources and political focus year after year. The fight against terrorism demands a united stance.

New mobile services

PAKISTAN is no stranger to the sharing economy, yet a recent news item about big changes in the country's burgeoning telecom sector likely slipped the public's attention. This Wednesday, the PTA notified a policy framework for Mobile Virtual Network Operators, allowing a new type of service provider to enter the Pakistani market. Under the framework, smaller, 'virtual' companies can start offering mobile telecommunication services to Pakistani users. The authorities are hoping that the policy will encourage greater competition and benefit both users and existing companies. Newer, smaller companies can enter and compete on the basis of their customer service and innovative packages for end users, and they will not need to set up new infrastructure or buy spectrum licences. Instead, they can buy network capacity in bulk from the existing players on wholesale rates and resell it under their own brand name. In short, they will 'share' infrastructure and spectrums with bigger players. The barrier to entry for MVNOs is mainly the $140,000 licence fee. That is not a lot, considering the kind of investment it used to take to establish a cellular network. It sounds like a lucrative deal for interested parties.

But though this looks like a promising step forward, the regulatory authority will still need to midwife the transformation it is hoping to trigger. Many other countries have previously experimented with MVNOs; some successfully, others less so. Drawing on their experiences, Pakistan should try to provide as enabling an environment as possible. This will include setting fair pricing benchmarks for the market between new operators and existing players, so that newer companies have a fair chance to profit. Further, as pointed out by one expert, a point the regulator must reconsider is its decision to compel MVNOs to use the same number prefixes assigned to the company they sign a deal with, as this might inadvertently position the new companies as sub-brands of the parent network operator, given the strong association of each '03xx' prefix with one of the big players. That would complicate a new company's efforts to establish itself as a distinct player. The government should take these concerns seriously and treat the opportunity with enthusiasm. The temptation to net quick gains through licence fees will be strong, but a solid policy can yield dividends for years to come for both users and operators.

Flight of harmony

AFTER 14 years, direct flights between Bangladesh and Pakistan are ready for take-off. Biman Bangladesh Airlines' first Dhaka to Karachi flight will fly on Jan 29, with two weekly flights. This resumption is both welcome and necessary; it establishes connectivity between the two countries and also encourages tourism, people-to-people contact, business collaborations, and overdue "family reunions". While cargo ships set sail from Karachi to Chittagong port last year, air travellers have been taking connecting flights through air corridors such as Dubai and Doha as Pakistani aircraft cannot fly over Indian airspace. The renewed bonhomie between Dhaka and Islamabad, following the fall of Sheikh Hasina's authoritarian government, has led to significant diplomatic steps to improve ties. The new ease of travel, and an earlier announcement of smooth business visa processes by Dhaka to encourage investment from Pakistan, promise opportunities for both countries.

The fault lines of history have haunted us for decades. A fresh start should, therefore, be built on the values of respect, commitment and the acknowledgement of each other's way of life. Bangladesh brings wider access to Southeast Asia and the Far East for Pakistan. In the same way, Pakistan can become the doorway to Central Asia, the Middle East and Africa for Bangladesh. Undeniably, the two sides can do with strategic clout on the Indian Ocean to widen their trade interests. Additionally, the robust pharmaceutical industry in Bangladesh can translate into affordable treatment and medicinal support for Pakistan's underprivileged groups. From our end, world class sports and medical equipment can benefit Bangladesh. In short, the burgeoning middle classes in both states have much to gain from this connectivity, such as mutual investment and agricultural support to stall food shortage. Above all, it fosters goodwill. All stakeholders should collectively champion these measures to bolster security and solidarity in the region.

BY AHMER BILAL SOOFI

IWT: the legal response

Pakistan must protest at every step India takes towards building works on the western rivers.

WHILE Indian External Minister S. Jaishankar shook hands with Pakistan's National Assembly Speaker Ayaz Sadiq in Dacca, the government in New Delhi announced it was advancing the timelines of hydropower and storage works on the western rivers, which Islamabad suspects are meant to enhance India's capability to obstruct water flows to Pakistan.

Regardless of India's political characterisation of it, the Indus Waters Treaty remains legally binding. Under the Vienna Convention on the Law of Treaties, a party cannot suspend a bilateral treaty in the absence of specific grounds such as material breach, impossibility of performance, etc. In the view of the Permanent Court of Arbitration and the president of the World Bank, India's unilateral suspension of the IWT has no legal basis. However, since India has held the treaty obligations in abeyance on its own, Pakistan, while adhering to procedural steps in the treaty as a 'legal baseline', will, at the same time, be free to lean on the general principles of international law. It can, in principle, resort to any countermeasure, including coercive means to safeguard its right of uninterrupted water flow — that, however, would be the measure of last resort. Now Pakistan should develop a legal strategy to protest and object systematically at every step on the ground that India takes towards the construction of these works on the western rivers in order to make out its case for eventual countermeasure — should the need regrettably still remain.

Whenever India initiates land acquisition or takes administrative steps indicating a decision to construct a project on the western rivers, Pakistan should immediately invoke general water law jurisprudence as well as Annexure D, paragraph 9, which obligates India to provide design information "as soon as" it has decided to construct a hydroelectric plant. It must be asserted in writing that request for design information under the IWT is not to be implied as Pakistan giving its go-ahead to the hydro work, otherwise its claim that an increase in the number of hydro projects are actually intended for long-term water coercion will be undermined.

On the other hand, the very *decision* to choose a certain site and the administrative or *political decision* to 'begin the works' on the western rivers must be objected to by Pakistan in a separate note based on international water law developed outside the IWT. It should assert as being made simultaneously under the UN Charter as well because the construction on sites constitutes a 'threat of water coercion'. Timely protest will prevent India from later arguing that Pakistan had acquiesced in the project's initiation. The act of a well-formulated protest should be communicated to all major world capitals as well.

When India issues tenders, expressions of interest, or consultant advertisements in respect of any work on the western rivers, Pakistan should, notwithstanding its objection on the very need for the hydro work, treat these as substantive steps towards implementation. Under the legal baseline of Annexure D, paragraphs 9-15, India must not proceed to technical finalisation or implementation before Pakistan has examined the design. Pakistan should assert that tendering constitutes advancement of the project without fulfilling mandatory procedural obligations, notify India that any commercial commitments undertaken at this stage are at India's own risk, and clarify that Pakistan's rights cannot be prejudiced by India's contractual arrangements with third parties. This approach aligns with international practice, where states routinely warn contractors that disputed projects may be subject to international adjudication.

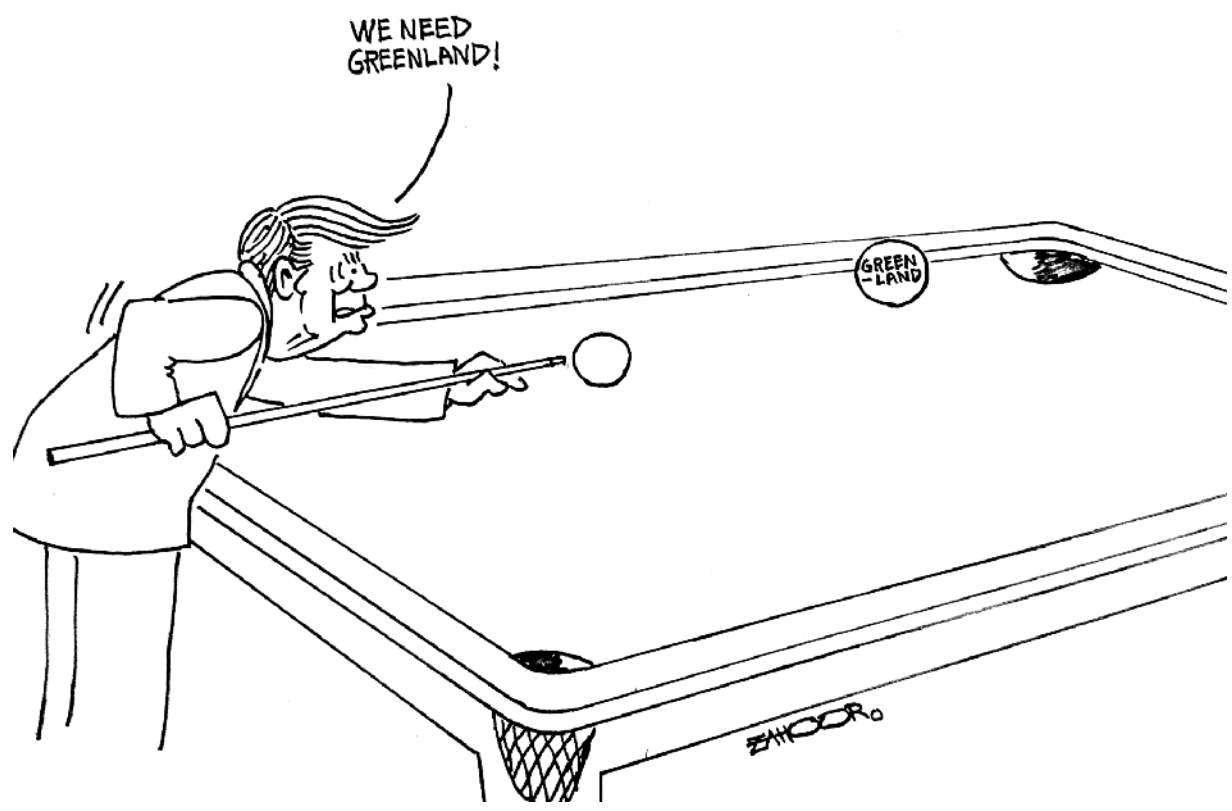
If India awards a construction contract, Pakistan must treat this as an irreversible step. Under Annexure D, India must not proceed to construction until Pakistan's objections have been addressed and, if necessary, resolved through the treaty's dispute-resolution mechanisms. Pakistan should state that awarding a construction contract while design objections remain unaddressed or unresolved is a material breach of procedural obligations, notify New Delhi that any construction undertaken during an unresolved dispute is at India's own risk, and clarify that such actions cannot create legal rights or estoppel against Pakistan. This language aligns with arbitral jurisprudence, emphasising that unilateral advancement during a dispute cannot prejudice the other party's rights.

Once physical works are about to begin — such as the mobilisation of machinery or the initiation of excavation — Pakistan must immediately document and formally object to the commencement of construction. The letters should assert that commencement of the works violates the IWT's requirement that disputes be resolved before implementation, notify India that Pakistan's rights remain fully preserved, and record that any irreversible works cannot be used to justify non-compliant design features. This step is essential for building a record for potential recourse to a neutral expert or court of arbitration. At any stage where design information is available, Pakistan should raise substantive technical objections grounded in Annexures D and E. These may include excessive pondage or live storage, gated spillways inconsistent with IWT criteria, intake levels permitting drawdown beyond permissible limits, operational rules enabling flow manipulation, and the cumulative impact of multiple projects.

To summarise, each step from the Indian side (site selection, construction or manipulation of the water flow) has to be checkmated by two parallel documented protests or objections — one under the legal baseline of the IWT and its annexures and the other under the principles of international law relating to the use of force and lower riparian rights since the intent of water coercion and its threat coming from Indian officials on formal forums is an outright internationally wrongful act. Pakistan's preference remains a peaceful and rules-based resolution of the water issue.

At present, Pakistan's most effective response lies in systematic, legally grounded protest at every stage of India's project development, which is communicated clearly to all major world capitals. That way Pakistan can show a well-defined trail of all the efforts it has undertaken to attempt to resolve the issue peacefully. ■

The writer is a former caretaker federal law minister.



BY AISHA KHAN

When might becomes right

THE US invasion of Venezuela — however it is ultimately justified in Washington — marks more than a regional rupture. It signals a deeper shift in how power is exercised and normalised in a world where climate stress, resource scarcity and geopolitical rivalry are converging. History will likely remember this moment not simply as another intervention, but as a test case for a new global logic: that in an era of shrinking resources and accelerating crises, raw power can once again override law, norms and restraint.

The immediate political implications are obvious enough: destabilisation in Latin America, erosion of US credibility, and the hardening of global blocs. But beneath these headlines lies a far more consequential question. What does this approach licence in a world where climate change is transforming resources — oil, water, food, minerals — into strategic prizes? And what does it do to the fragile, hard-won rights architecture that was meant to protect the vulnerable from precisely this kind of power politics?

Venezuela is not only a state in political crisis; it sits atop one of the world's largest proven oil reserves. In an era where the energy transition is uneven, contested and geopoliticised, control over hydrocarbons remains a lever of global influence. The danger is not that Venezuela is unique, but that it is precedent-setting. If military force can be openly used to secure strategic resources under the banner of national interest, then the line separating competition from conquest dissolves.

Climate change makes this more dangerous, not less. As droughts intensify, glaciers retreat and arable land shrinks, resources that were once abundant become scarce, and scarcity sharpens incentives for coercion. Water, food systems, rare earths, and energy corridors will increasingly define security calculations. The risk is that climate stress becomes the silent accomplice of militarism — an unspoken justification for territorial grabs, economic sieges and interventions framed as 'stability operations'.

For decades, international law and multilateral institutions existed precisely to prevent this descent into the law of the jungle. They were imperfect, often violated, and frequently biased. But they represented an aspirational idea: that civilisation advances when power is constrained by rules, and when the strong accept limits for the sake of collective survival. The erosion of that idea carries consequences far beyond borders.

One of the least examined impacts of such moments is psychological and normative. When powerful states openly disregard international law, they do more than break rules — they teach. They signal to other governments, elites and armed actors that restraint is optional and accountability negotiable. Over time, this corrodes not just global order but domestic norms as well. If international verdicts can be ignored with impunity, how long before court judgements at home are treated as inconveniences rather than obligations?

> The risk is that climate stress becomes the silent accomplice of militarism — an unspoken justification for territorial grabs.

When might becomes right, rights become fragile.

The message received on the ground is: strength wins. For young men in conflict-prone societies, for elites resisting accountability, for armed groups seeking legitimacy, the lesson is corrosive. When behaviour follows belief that law is merely a tool of the powerful, violence becomes easier to rationalise, compromise harder to sustain, and solidarity weaker to defend.

There is also a civilisational cost. The post-war rights-based order asserted that progress lay not in domination but in dignity, not in conquest but cooperation. To retreat from that, especially under the pressures of climate change, is to accept a more brutal future as inevitable rather than resistible.

South Asia sits uneasily in this emerging landscape. It is already one of the most climate-vulnerable regions in the world. Rivers that cross borders — the Indus, the Ganges, the Brahmaputra — are lifelines for hundreds of millions, and potential flashpoints for conflict. If the global norm shifts towards unilateralism and force, water disputes risk becoming security crises rather than governance challenges.

The region's nuclearised status complicates this further. India, Pakistan and China possess nuclear weapons, which may deter full-scale war but do little to prevent coercion below the threshold of open conflict. History suggests that nuclear deterrence freezes some conflicts while intensifying others — proxy wars, economic strangulation, territorial salami-slicing. Climate stress adds fuel to these dynamics, turning environmental pressures into strategic vulnerabilities.

In such a context, the normalisation of resource-driven intervention elsewhere is deeply destabilising. It lowers the moral and political costs of aggressive behaviour, even as the material stakes rise. It also narrows the space for democratic accountability. When security is framed as survival in a hostile world, dissent becomes suspect, and emergency becomes permanent. Democracy erodes not in a single coup, but through the steady justification of exceptional power.

The invasion of Venezuela may be defended as an anomaly, or a limited action. But history is shaped less by intentions than by patterns. If this moment comes to represent a broader acceptance that money, power and military might can be used without consequence, then we are not merely witnessing a geopolitical shift — we are entering a new moral era.

The question is not whether resources will shrink or crises will multiply. The question is whether humanity responds by reviving restraint or abandoning it. The answer will determine not only the fate of international law or democracy, but the everyday safety and dignity of those who have the least power to defend themselves. If civilisation chooses force over foresight, the future will be governed by the law of the jungle. ■

The writer is chief executive of the Civil Society Coalition for Climate Change.
aisha@csccc.org.pk

E-Mail: Editorial: editor@dawn.com | Resident Editor (Islamabad): re.isb@dawn.com | Resident Editor (Lahore): re.lhr@dawn.com | Karachi: city@dawn.com | Tel: (021)35670001 | Fax (Edit) (021)35682187 | UAN 111.444.777
(Management) (021)35683188, (Advt): (021) 35683801 | Marketing (Karachi): mktg@dawn.com (021)35613099 | Marketing (Islamabad): mktg.isb@dawn.com (051)2202701-5 | Marketing (Lahore): mktg.lhr@dawn.com (042)111-444-777